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# First Ladies in the Press: Analysis of New York Times coverage of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama

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## **Abstract**

This study analyzed *New York Times* coverage of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush and Michelle Obama's official first lady activities during the first term of their husband's presidencies.

Language used by journalists was analyzed to determine whether there was a negative, positive, or neutral tone used that may have indicated support, favorability, or criticism; and if so, whether there are certain activities or types of activities that warrant more negative or positive coverage; and how this changes depending the first lady and activity covered. ProQuest Central was used to find relevant *New York Times* articles that reported the first lady acting in an official role, and the articles were categorized based on what activity was reported and coded according to the negativity or positivity in language and tone on a five-point scale.

The following hypotheses were tested with the subsequent results: (1) The first lady's main campaign or project (healthcare reform, literacy and education, and childhood obesity, respectively) would have the most coverage, and this was supported by coverage of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama; (2) Hillary Clinton would have more coverage in general than Laura Bush or Michelle Obama, and this was also supported by the results; (3) Coverage of political activities would be the most negative in tone, this was only supported by coverage of Michelle Obama; and (4) Hillary Clinton would have the most negative coverage because her main project was policy-based, and this was also supported by the results.

## **Executive Summary**

*New York Times* coverage of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush and Michelle Obama's official first lady activities was analyzed. "Official" activities include any that the first lady uses her platform and influence as first lady to advance. This may be any campaign, cause, initiative, or general first lady duties like White House upkeep or planning dinners. The first lady usually chooses one broad, national issue and advocates for it through delivering speeches/remarks, hosting events, making public/ televised appearances, writing books/ opinion pieces, addressing Congress or Congressional committees, and any other actions she may choose. The main projects for the first ladies studied in this project are: Hillary Clinton's healthcare reform campaign, Laura Bush's education and literacy campaign, and Michelle Obama's health and childhood obesity campaign. Other important actions, such as campaigning, foreign visits, supporting policy and many others, were also considered official activities. There was a focus on "official" activities in order to filter the coverage studied, instead of reading articles about the first lady's fashion choices, family members, or other kinds of gossip.

This study analyzed articles written during the first terms of the first lady's husbands' presidencies. This was to provide consistency among what was covered—Michelle Obama is still the current first lady, so information on her first term as well as the other first ladies' first terms is readily available. The press is also generally considered more lenient and favorable to the president, and perhaps his wife, during the earlier years of the presidency, so choosing the same date range to study for each first lady provides some objective and consistent background (Scharrer & Bissell, 2008. p. 66).

Relevant articles about official activities were read to code for negativity/positivity of language, on a five-point scale. The scale was Very Negative (1), Negative (2), Neutral (3),

Positive (4), and (5) Very Positive. Four main hypotheses were tested: (1) Actions concerning the first ladies' main projects, which are health care reform, literacy/education, and childhood obesity, will receive more coverage than activities supporting other initiatives; (2) Hillary Clinton will likely have more articles written about her than either Laura Bush or Michelle Obama; (3) Of all of the coverage studied, political actions were covered the most negatively; and, (4) There will be a greater degree of negative language and tone, in general, in coverage of Hillary Clinton than of Laura Bush or Michelle Obama.

The results supported the first hypothesis that actions concerning the first ladies' main projects would have more coverage than other initiatives for only two first ladies studied, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama. The results supported the second hypothesis that Hillary Clinton would have the most coverage in general. The results did not support the third hypothesis that coverage of political activities would have the most negative tone for Hillary Clinton or Laura Bush, and only slightly so for Michelle Obama. Finally, the fourth hypothesis that Hillary Clinton would have the most negative coverage in general was supported by the results.

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*“The First Lady is an unpaid public servant elected by one person – her husband.”*

*-Lady Bird Johnson*





## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The American public has always held a fascination and respect for the first lady of the time. Even before President Zachary Taylor coined the term in 1849 when he referred to Dolley Madison as “our first lady for half a century,” the presidents’ wives were respected members of the community who captured attention from the press and public throughout administrations. People and reporters lined the streets in each town Martha Washington traveled through on her way to her new life as first lady to wave or call out to her, and “a story in the May 26, 1789, *Pennsylvania and Daily Advertiser* described the reaction of the crowd, noting that ‘every countenance bespoke the feelings of affectionate respect’” (Lisa Burns, 2004, p. 1).

From the earliest days of Martha Washington’s first journey as first lady to today’s expanded presidential institution and giant media conglomerates, the simplest matters such as what the first lady is wearing or eating in a particular instance, in addition to the more complicated issues like how she wields any amount of influence over the president, have been covered earnestly. As the role of the press and media grew larger and events were broadcast on television, the first ladies acquired an almost celebrity status, and were covered by some media outlets in a similar fashion as celebrities. Robert Watson (2000) writes in *The Presidents’ Wives: Reassessing the Office of the First Lady* that the first lady “is a social and cultural trendsetter, and what she wears, how she styles her hair, and what she chooses to do often ignite a popular following. . . . First ladies have become leading celebrities” (p. 75). The evolution of Hillary Clinton’s hairstyles, Jacqueline Kennedy’s assortment of chic designer pantsuits and hats, Nancy Reagan’s astrology fixations and Michelle Obama’s muscular arms and vacation choices are all topics that have fascinated, infuriated and entertained journalists and readers throughout the

years (Watson, 2000, p. 75). Indeed, it seems that while first ladies are usually highly approved of by the public, any whisper of rumor or scandal is investigated and covered in the press and media along with any other activities she chooses to pursue (Watson, 2000, p.75).

Studying first lady coverage proves to be important when considering the influence the first lady has in terms of both the presidency and as a public figure, and the influence the media has on her public perception. The first lady is “an active participant in presidential affairs, both officially and unofficially” while also “[gracing] the covers of some of the most popular magazines in the country, [appearing] on the evening news broadcasts, and [influencing] fashion trends, all of which speak to [her] enormous popularity” (Watson, 2000, pgs. 70-75). This popularity and influence translates into ample media coverage and reports, which is significant, because “few people ever have direct contact with the first lady, so the majority of the public’s information comes from the media. . . . Throughout the years, journalists have played a significant role in shaping the position” (Burns, 2008).

While the first lady position has not been formally defined by either the Constitution or subsequent legislation– though there have been attempts to do so– there is a general and evolving pattern of duties first ladies generally choose to assume (Watson, 2000, p. 72). This study focuses on what can be considered official duties, and the coverage of them in the *New York Times*. Official activities include the first lady campaigning for her chosen cause or issue, or otherwise using her time and resources as first lady to accomplish some goal or garner awareness or attention to some event, legislation, or initiative. Specifically, this thesis will study how the *New York Times* newspaper has covered Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama’s activities in support of their chosen projects, initiatives, or other official activities, in order to identify which activities warrant the most coverage, as well as the most negative or positive

coverage, and if patterns exist in how certain types of actions are covered. A main hypothesis tested is if more political actions do indeed have a greater amount of coverage in general, and coverage more negative in tone.

### 1.1 The Role of the First Lady: Formality and Informality

Understanding the first lady's activities and the media surrounding her today would not be complete without establishing a historical context for the role. Generally, first ladies have always accompanied their husbands to the White House.<sup>1</sup> And, arguably, just as much public interest surrounds the presidents' spouse as the president himself. But what has changed over time and will likely continue to change, if not the attention the public affords her, is the actual role of the first lady: what she does and what she is expected to be doing.

The role is informal as there is no outlined or delineated role for the first lady, but there has been statutory and case law that attempts to define it as a formal role (MaryAnne Borrelli, 2002, p. 40). Statutory law, including the Postal Revenue and Federal Salary Act of 1967 and the White House Personnel Authorization Act of 1978, provided "limited guidance" by attempting to "formally define" the first lady "as a member of the White House Office" (Borrelli, 2002, p. 28).<sup>2</sup> Case law about the first lady's role includes a 1993 lawsuit in which three interest groups, the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, Inc. (AAPS), the American Council for Health Care Reform, and the National Legal and Policy Center, filed a suit against Hillary Clinton (*AAPS et al. v. Clinton*) in order to seek access to the closed door healthcare task force deliberations. They argued that meetings must be open "when the membership of an executive

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<sup>1</sup> Presidents elected without spouses or whose spouses deceased while president: James Buchanan, Grover Cleveland, Chester Arthur, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren and Thomas Jefferson.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for relevant sections of laws.

advisory body included other than full-time federal employees or officials. . . . The task force member who failed to satisfy this criterion was its chair, the first lady” (Borrelli, 2002, p. 28). On appeal, The D.C. Circuit Court found the first lady to be a *de facto* federal official, and “a concurring opinion by Circuit Court Judge James L. Buckley signaled that debates about the first lady’s legal status were far from over. After carefully examining the law, Buckley concluded that the first lady was neither a federal official nor a federal employee” (Borrelli, 2002, pgs. 31-32). Both statutory and case law have attempted to peg down the actual, formal role of the first lady, but there is still no specifically official role for her today. There may be more guidelines, which is what the statutory and case laws have succeeded in creating, but the first ladyship has remained a largely informal role with much flexibility for the first lady of the time to choose what she wants to do.

Although still largely an unofficial role, there is power in the position that Robert Watson (2000) describes as including eleven fundamental duties: wife and mother, public figure and celebrity, nation’s social hostess, symbol of the American woman, White House manager and preservationist, campaigner, social advocate and champion of social causes, presidential spokesperson, presidential and political party booster, diplomat, and political and presidential partner (p. 72). These duties were identified both as those that the public expects her to perform and that modern first ladies since Eleanor Roosevelt have chosen to perform, though Watson (2000) writes the list may not be applicable to the earliest first ladies and may not be applicable to first ladies 50 years from now, either, as there is “continual evolution of the office and changing standards of the times” (p. 72).

Watson studied the development of the role of the first lady in great detail in his article “The First Lady Reconsidered: Presidential Partner and Political Institution,” (1997) and argues

that while there may not be a specific role outlined for her, she must be considered a part of the “team” within the “plural presidency” as she holds an office with a greater budget and staff than many advisers (Watson, 1997, p. 806). Notwithstanding the plentiful resources available to her, the fact that she is also married to the president of the United States should not be overlooked or underestimated. While relationships between spouses differ greatly depending on the couple, Watson (1997) states, “the president's character, beliefs on the family, and commitment to women's issues might be examined through his relationship with his wife, as should her symbolic role shaping or reflecting society's shifting views on womanhood and gender” (p. 806). And while some first ladies were more influential to their husbands than others, Watson (1997) also states that it would be “wrong to assume” that there were none before the famous Eleanor Roosevelt who were “active and influential” first ladies (p. 808). But they were active in their own ways, establishing precedents and customs along the way that would work to influence later first ladies (Watson, 1997, p. 808).

Watson (1997) categorized the development of the role of the first lady into six distinct historical periods, with each period's ladies generally sharing some common characteristics that would work to influence later ones (p. 809). Though they can be largely categorized based on the commonalities, it is important to remember that each first lady acted differently and may fit into a different category than that of her time. The time periods are: (1) first spouses: shaping the image and role, 1789-1817; (2) absent spouses: idled by illness and death, 1817-1869; (3) transitional spouses: unfulfilled possibilities, 1869-1909; (4) aspiring spouses: developing new roles, 1909-1945; (5) supportive spouses: model wives in the public era, 1945-1974; and (6) modern spouses: public presidential partners, 1974-1996 (Watson, 1997, p. 810).

The years after 1996 are notably missing from Watson's timeline. But what this timeline does illustrate is that, for the most part, first ladies have had freedom in choosing what they decide to do once in the White House. They almost always function in the social hostess role of first lady and most were intelligent and ambitious women who helped to shape the role over time. They took cues from preceding first ladies that helped categorize them into similar periods. At the very least, they are expected to be somewhat public in their actions by supporting their husbands, supporting their own causes or other topics of their choosing. In terms of this study, these public actions together form the official role of the modern first lady.

### 1.2 The "Official" Role of the Modern First Lady

This study focused on coverage of first ladies conducting "official" activities. This means that modern first ladies are expected to use their platform as first lady to advance some campaign, cause, or initiative. A first lady usually chooses one broad, national issue and advocates for it through delivering speeches/remarks, hosting events, making public/ televised appearances, writing books/ opinion pieces, addressing Congress or Congressional committees, and any other actions she may choose. These projects "provide a voice nationally for important issues" that are usually uncontroversial issues, though some have been policy-based, as well (Watson, 1997, p. 814). Examples include Rosalynn Carter's mental health campaign, Nancy Reagan's anti-drug campaign, Hillary Clinton's health care reform, and Michelle Obama's childhood obesity and health campaign (Watson, 1997, p. 814). However, the first lady rarely advocates *only* for her chosen project. Hillary Clinton's diplomatic travels to South Asia, Laura Bush delivering the weekly presidential radio address to discuss oppression of women in Afghanistan, and Michelle Obama publically supporting legislation such as the economic

stimulus bill are all also examples of official activities. Acting in an official role includes supporting any other cause, whether it is her husband's campaign or party issue, an international issue, certain legislation, diplomatic relations, or White House upkeep and social events. First ladies have traditionally been important campaign partners, and even their social hostessing and “important ceremonial duties” have made them “more critical to the political fortunes of the president than the vice president” (O’Connor, Nye, & Assendelft, 1996, p. 843). These kinds of duties have been important since Martha Washington’s time, because “although [she] had no model, she quickly moved to host parties to assist her husband in achieving his political goals” (O’Connor et al., 1996, p. 844). Hostessing and planning social events and being involved in general White House duties are important duties and integral to the role, and so are considered official first lady activities.

The reason why these duties are collectively considered official activities for the purposes of this study is because when the first lady is doing them, she is either using the first lady platform, title and resources to bring attention or awareness to something of her choosing, or conducting an activity integral to the White House, like hosting a state dinner. She may have (and usually does have) personal reasons for choosing a particular cause, and may have worked on it before being first lady, but nonetheless she utilizes the official first lady title to advance her goals and, arguably, legacy. The eleven fundamental duties of the first lady that Watson listed are all important responsibilities that modern first ladies are still expected to uphold, and some of the duties can be considered acting in an official first lady role, such as White House manager and preservationist, campaigner, social advocate and champion of social causes, presidential spokesperson, presidential and political party booster, diplomat, and political and presidential partner (Watson, 1997, p. 810).

These official first lady activities, and the media surrounding them, are the focus of this thesis because of the idea that the first lady of the time represents American women of the time. She chooses the activities she wants to support, and the press in turn chooses how it will report those activities, and this ultimately does affect public perception. Studying how the media covered the choices and actions the respective first ladies made regarding both specific projects and other initiatives, by identifying language use is important because of “the media’s potential to play a powerful role in shaping public opinion about political leaders” and how “the public’s perceptions and attitudes toward first ladies can be formed from the information the mass media transmit” (Scharrer & Bissell, 2000, p. 56).

For example, Michelle Obama had an entirely new dynamic to face as the first African American first lady. Krissah Thompson and Vanessa Williams of the *Washington Post* wrote, “African American women see their own challenges mirrored in Michelle Obama’s” (Thompson & Williams, 2012). The journalists conducted a survey that determined that African American women strongly relate to Michelle Obama, and “nearly 9 in 10 black women think that the first lady understands their problems” (Thompson & Williams, 2012). This indicates that many African American women feel Michelle Obama can relate to them, but how was this conveyed to them? How Michelle Obama’s activities acting in an official role are covered in the media may play a large part in this public perception and relatability. Janus Adams of the Women’s Media Center writes that “[Michelle Obama’s] presence is already paying huge dividends” and this is so because “you can read it in her mission statement from the campaign . . . you can hear it in the messages she’s delivering on her ‘getting to-know Washington’ tour of Cabinet-level departments . . . Michelle Obama cuts a striking image, changing the way African American women see and portray ourselves” (Adams, 2009). Essentially, her activities, mannerisms and



image while campaigning can largely affect public perception of her and of how women, and the public at large, relate to her. And because most Americans can only learn about these events through the media, the effect the press and methods of reporting on these activities have on the public is, therefore, important to establish.

### 1.3 Media Portrayal of the First Lady

The first ladyship is inherently a gendered role. Even the title “first lady” indicates the gendered nature of the role— what is to happen when a woman is finally president is a question left to another study and time. Although this may seem like an obvious observation, the fact that it is intrinsically gendered complicates coverage surrounding her and the study of it. Lisa Burns (2009) explains,

The first lady office is full of contradiction. . . . Because the first lady is a gendered role, there are social norms and expectations associated with the “performance” of the position. The public nature of the position gives first ladies some latitude of performance in the public sphere, yet they must also conform to gender standards that often equate women’s roles with the private sphere of home and family. (Burns, 2009, p. 202).

This contradiction complicates coverage of the first lady, as she is essentially being covered because of actions she is taking in the capacity of her marriage. She may have had a successful career with many accolades to her name, but when she is first lady, she is first lady only because she married someone who became president. This title derives from her marriage. And when she is being covered in the media as first lady, the journalists, editors, and consumers of the coverage do not forget this fact and often incorporate home and family into coverage. She is free to conduct her own business and activities, but the gendered first lady title also requires her to remain aware of her marriage and role as wife while doing so.

Framing is the “selection of words, topics, and ideas in communication and the effects of these selections on public opinion. . . . Media messages, such as news stories, are bounded by practices of inclusion—what’s inside the frame— and exclusion— that which we do not see (Sterling, 2009, p. 619). Essentially a journalist uses framing when deciding the angle of the story, which details to incorporate and highlight, and which details to omit. These decisions may not be the first thing one notices when watching or reading coverage, but they are conscious and intentional by the part of the journalist, as “communicators are always making decisions about what to say” (Scharrer & Bissell, 2000, p. 59). Framing helps explain “how gender ideologies have pervaded first lady press coverage,” because “gender is a primary framing device used by journalists. When women are the subject of news narratives, gender is often the primary, if not the only, frame” (Burns, 2009, p. 203).

Gender stereotypes are important to identify if used in journalistic reporting. A stereotype implies a relatively complete idea about a subject based on a small amount of information (Williams, Cruz, and Hintze, 1988). Women stereotyped as compassionate were seen as dealing with issues such as the elderly better than men, while men stereotyped as tougher and aggressive were believed to be better able to deal with military and hard news issues (Deaux and Lewis, 1984). These stereotypes have been used often enough to portray a political woman as too emotional, implying that this is a negative attribute, and that men are rational and better suited for politics. In the case of first ladies, Scharrer and Bissell (2008) write, “Even though the media have highlighted, in some cases, a first lady taking on new roles and responsibilities, challenges have often been accompanied by criticism. This criticism may stem from many arenas including the notion that first ladies and women have a predetermined, traditional role that is expected of them” (p. 58). Tools such as stereotyping using gender roles in coverage of first ladies, along

with framing the first lady as either traditional or politically active, may negatively present the first lady or influence consumers of the news to react a certain way.

When analyzing coverage of the first lady acting in an official role, language tools like tone may be used to indicate to readers that the action in discussion is negative or positive, as tone implies a certain attitude by the author towards the subject. Analyzing tone of any kind of coverage is important because, the Pew Research Center explains that, “The volume of coverage is one thing. But in politics, not all coverage is equal. . . . What was the tone of the coverage each candidate received?” (Pew Research Center, 2007). Use of certain adjectives, phrases, descriptions or “assertions” can indicate a positive, negative, or neutral tone in a story, which can shift meaning and intent by the journalist (Pew Research Center, 2007). The idea that the first lady of the time represents American women of the time, and the “argument” that press coverage “tends to reinforce and therefore magnify any phenomenon it observes,” both support the importance of studying tone of coverage of first ladies (Pew Research Center, 2007).

For example, consider the following excerpt from the *New York Times* article titled, ““Mom in Chief” Touches on Policy; Tongues Wag,” which reported Michelle Obama’s “getting to-know Washington” tour of Cabinet-level departments:

In her first weeks in the White House, Mrs. Obama has been the gracious hostess and loyal spouse, welcoming visitors to the Executive Mansion and accompanying President Obama to a prayer breakfast and to a charter school to read to second graders. But in a departure from her predecessor, Mrs. Obama has also begun promoting bills that support her husband’s policy priorities. . . . It is a notably different approach than the one embraced by the former first lady, Laura Bush, who like most others steered clear of discussing legislation. Some observers praised Mrs. Obama’s foray into the legislative debate, saying the new first lady, who is a Harvard-educated lawyer and a former hospital executive, was eminently qualified to promote the president’s policies. Others expressed surprise, saying they had expected Mrs. Obama to focus on her daughters and on the traditional issues she had emphasized in the presidential campaign, like supporting military families and working parents. Her remarks, they said, carried echoes of former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, though Mrs. Obama has said she will not become involved in policymaking as Mrs. Clinton did. (Rachel Swarns, 2009).

Examining language decisions the journalist made when reporting this activity can reveal a few things. The first thing to note is that the journalist does report both criticism and approval of Michelle Obama's actions. Including both sides of an issue is usually a sign of an objective report. However, the language used can be analyzed further to decide if the subject is actually being painted in a negative or positive light. The title of the article is the first sign. Michelle Obama often referred to herself as "mom in chief," but coupling the phrase with "tongues wag" leans towards an unfavorable portrayal of Michelle Obama, as it suggests a caricatured representation of the issue in question in comparison to a more objective title like "Michelle Obama touches on Policy." Next to examine are the use of phrases such as "gracious hostess" and "loyal spouse" that can be interpreted to indicate what the author and public believes Mrs. Obama *should* be acting as. This is further reinforced when the author compares Michelle Obama to Laura Bush, stating her support of legislation "is a notably different approach" because "most other" first ladies "steered clear of discussing legislation." Many first ladies throughout history actually have discussed or advised on legislation, such as Sarah Polk, Helen Taft, Florence Harding, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ellen Wilson, and Rosalynn Carter to name a few (Watson, 1997, p. 815). While this can be an oversight of the journalist, language used may indicate that Michelle Obama's actions are unique in a slightly negative way.

A close reading of language used, such as in the excerpt above, shows that while the journalist does provide an objective report in many ways, there are language uses and choices that may, even slightly, portray Michelle Obama and other first ladies more negatively than a purely objective report would. These choices are examined in this study in order to determine whether a pattern exists in how certain types of actions are covered.

## Chapter 2

### Previous Literature

The following sources studied media coverage surrounding first ladies and rhetoric used by them in order to determine how negatively or positively the first lady was covered, and why. Lisa Burns' (2008) book, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, discusses how the press frames first ladies in general coverage by analyzing articles written during campaign years from five sources: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *McCall's*. Burns studied the first ladies from Martha Washington to Laura Bush. Burns found that media coverage shaped public expectations of the first lady position and, because they are positioned as "ideals" of American womanhood, journalists often expect first ladies to embody traditional gender roles while also reflecting the changing times (Burns 2008). Similarly, Scharrer and Bissell (2008) examined media coverage of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Hillary Clinton in two studies; the first studied stories in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and the second studied photographs from *Time* magazine. They found that the more politically active the first lady was, the more negative the stories but the less stereotypical the photographs. They also found that first ladies are described in terms of traditional and stereotypical roles and gender stereotypes, such as being "submissive, warm, nurturing and gentle" (Scharrer & Bissell, 2008, p. 58). Both Burns (2008) and Scharrer and Bissell (2008) analyzed articles from specific sources and found similar results in negative, stereotypical coverage. Similarly, James N. Wachai (2003) analyzed coverage from *Time* Magazine and found in his thesis "Journalistic Gender Stereotyping of First Ladies Laura Bush

and Hillary Clinton” that of Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton was framed as more politically active and was also more negatively stereotyped.

Beasley (2005) found that “coverage of first ladies reflects quandaries over news values related to women and incorporates societal strains over changing gender roles in American life,” and she studied the press surrounding Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy and the first ladies onwards until Laura Bush. Winfield (1997) found news coverage about first ladies is centered in five areas: three areas are of an ideal and traditional upper-middle-class American woman in a “supportive” and “nurturing” role as an escort, a leader of social events, and philanthropic with charitable groups, and the other two news areas are of the first lady yielding presidential political influence and a following. She argues that journalists use these patterns as part of evaluating how well the woman is acting as first lady (Winfield, 1997, p. 241). Similarly, Winfield & Friedman (2003) studied coverage of prospective first ladies during campaigning and found that reporters framed the women in the “escort” role of supporting and defending their husbands, focused on candidate-wife relationship and sacrifices the wife in question made for her husband, while also framing the women as being “reluctant” to enter the political sphere (Winfield & Friedman, 2003, p. 550).

Shawn Parry-Giles (2000) studied press coverage of Hillary Clinton and found that image-making is an important press practice that relies on a few factors, including stereotypes, and Hillary Clinton was “trapped by more traditional images of the first lady. . . . Newsmaking strategies in the postmodern political context help reify a mediated collective memory of Hillary Rodham Clinton, which is reductionistic, iconic, hyperreal, and emblematic of news coverage concerning political women” (Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 205). Winfield (2007) also studied coverage of Hillary Clinton to determine whether “a public woman moves beyond an expected wife role,

the media response to her actions would be negative” (Winfield, 2007).

These studies found that journalists use of patterns and frames usually portray first ladies in negative ways. What some of these sources (Burns 2008, Wachai 2003, Parry-Giles 2000, Scharrer & Bissell 2008, Winfield 2003, Winfield & Friedman 2003) share and have in common is the importance placed on defining media frames/stereotypes and describing the difference between “traditional” roles of the first lady versus the more political roles.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research**

This study is attempting to determine whether journalists who covered the first lady acting in an “official” role generally leaned towards employing certain language choices at the time of reporting, such as negative or positive tone or language, that may portray the first lady in a negative or positive light, and how this may change depending on what action is being covered. Are more political actions, such as those that directly involve the first lady with Congress, congressional committees or certain legislation, covered more negatively? Which kinds of activities are covered the most negatively or positively? How does this change depending on the first lady? The first ladies Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama were chosen because as the most recent first ladies, results from analyzing their coverage is most applicable and relevant to today’s political woman.

#### 3.1 Background and Research Questions

Hillary Clinton pursued a political, policy-focused health care reform campaign during her husband’s first term. Beasley (2005) writes that “on all sides, Hillary Rodham Clinton . . . drew both acclaim and condemnation. . . . The news media occupied a key position in the battle between her supporters and her detractors, with both sides vying for publicity to support their views” (p. 204). As first lady, her time in the White House was noteworthy yet divisive for a few reasons. She was the first first lady to set up an office in the West Wing of the White House as well as the East Wing, the first to chair an important task force (for healthcare reform), the first to serve as a global advocate for women, the first first lady forced to defend her husband during



impeachment proceedings, and the first to be subpoenaed before a grand jury (Beasley, 2005, pgs. 201-203). Her experimentation with hairstyles and fashion also drew attention, so both her image and actions led to “continual coverage” of her in the media (Beasley, 2005, p. 217). Laura Bush, on the other hand, may have intentionally chosen a more traditional cause focused on literacy and education “in keeping with her husband’s election promise to restore dignity to the White House after the Clinton scandals” (Beasley, 2005, p. 225). She was considered nurturing, warm, and dignified and enjoyed high approval ratings throughout the terms (Beasley, 2005, p. 226). Michelle Obama’s health and childhood obesity awareness campaign also was not considered political or policy-based, but she chose to promote it through less conventional means, such as making guest appearances on popular television shows. Marian Burros wrote in “Someone's in the Kitchen With Michelle: The Secret Ingredient Is Politics” that, “The first lady's cameo on ‘Iron Chef’ is the latest example of her willingness to get her message across to the public in ways few of her predecessors would have considered” (Burros, 2009).

The *New York Times* was chosen as the publication to study partially because of the reliability of archived articles in the particular years chosen, as well as its influence and reputation as a “newspaper of record” (Martin & Hansen, 1998). It is important to note that many do believe the publication has a liberal bias (Sheppard, 2013). Coverage was only studied from the respective first terms to provide consistency among what was covered—Michelle Obama is still the current first lady, so information on her first term as well as the other first ladies’ first terms is readily available. The press is also generally considered more lenient and favorable to the president, and perhaps his wife, during the earlier years of the presidency, so choosing the same date range to study for each first lady provides some objective and consistent background (Scharrer & Bissell, 2008. p. 66).

The following research questions were studied:

1. During their husband's first terms in office in how many *New York Times* articles specifically reporting on the first lady acting in an "official" role were the first ladies Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama featured; specifically, the number of articles overall and number of articles about each specific activity.

**It is hypothesized that (1) actions concerning the first ladies' main projects, which are health care reform, literacy/education, and childhood obesity, will receive more coverage than activities supporting other initiatives.** Additionally, Hillary Clinton's main project was health care reform, which was a policy-based campaign that was an important political issue during the term, so **(2) she will likely have more articles written about her than either Laura Bush or Michelle Obama.**

2. In those articles reporting the first lady acting in an "official" role, how positive or negative were the language used and tone conveyed?

Scharrer & Bissell (2008) define negativity in coverage as "the tone of the newspaper story and the degree to which it is favorable or unfavorable, with negativity indicating the First Lady is portrayed in an unflattering light" (p. 62). Thus, negative language involves use of adjectives or any other word usage that may indicate disapproval or a negative opinion of the woman or action discussed. Terms such as "complained" or "alienated" are therefore considered negative. Positive language would indicate support, approval, or a flattering perspective on the first lady or action. Examples of positive language include describing the first lady as "spirited,"

“authentic” or “effective.” Neutral language would not indicate negativity or positivity, and includes terms such as “remarked” or “discussed.” Of course, language can be complex, so a deeper reading is often more necessary than highlighting individual terms or phrases.

There is much scholarship on Hillary Clinton’s decision to focus on a policy-based campaign while first lady, and most of it has established that she was portrayed negatively in the media (Scharrer & Bissell 2008, Burns 2008, Winfield 2007, Parry-Giles 2000). Scharrer & Bissell (2008) also found that more political actions made by the first ladies were covered more negatively. **It is therefore hypothesized that (3) for all of the coverage studied, political actions were covered the most negatively It is also hypothesized that (4) there will be a greater degree of negative language and tone, in general, in coverage of Hillary Clinton than of Laura Bush or Michelle Obama.**

Finally, this study looks at what the numbers and patterns found when answering the questions above reveal about coverage of first ladies, specifically when she was acting in the official first lady role. Is it true that more political actions warrant more negative coverage? What kind of political actions specifically (i.e. addressing Congress, publically supporting legislation, drafting legislation, etc.) warrant the most or least negative coverage? What kind of language in particular was used most often to indicate a negative or positive portrayal? And how does this differ depending on the first lady?

### 3.2 Methodology

ProQuest Central was used as the database to find the relevant *New York Times* articles, with the following searches for each first lady:

- For Hillary Clinton, the search terms were: “Hillary Clinton” and “first lady” and “new york times” (pub). The date range selected was January 20, 1993-1997.
- For Laura Bush, the search terms were: “Laura Bush” and “first lady” and “new york times” (pub). The date range selected was January 20, 2001-2005.
- For Michelle Obama, the search terms were: “Michelle Obama” and “first lady” and “new york times” (pub). The date range selected was January 20, 2009-2013.

The initial results from these searches were examined to select relevant articles *only* concerning the first ladies’ activities in their official roles. For example, there were 50+ articles concerning Hillary Clinton’s involvement in the Whitewater scandal. However, this study focused on articles reporting a first lady conducting an official activity, so those articles were not chosen to study as they involve actions taken before the Clintons were even in the White House. Articles about the first lady appearing at rallies, traveling abroad for diplomatic reasons, visiting hospitals and schools, and others along those lines were chosen to code instead. Articles concerning the first ladies’ fashion choices or family members (children in particular) were not chosen, either. While both are very important factors used in the making of the public image or persona of the first lady, they were not considered “official” activities for the purposes of this study.

After the initial search was made, only articles that mentioned the first lady and her action in the headline, lead paragraphs, or both were selected. This would ensure that the first lady and her activity were the focus or one of the foci of the article. Lead paragraphs usually are considered the first four paragraphs in an article (Scharrer & Bissell, 2008). It is important to note that many articles that appeared in search results very briefly mentioned the first lady only once and were not chosen to study, even if they were about a campaign she was supporting. For example, a 613-word article published on March 18, 2009 titled “House Passes Expansion of

Programs for Service,” by David Herszenhorn, covers approved legislation expanding government-sponsored service programs. And while Michelle Obama did consider service and volunteerism one of the issues she would be focused on campaigning for, and she did do many activities to support the passage of the legislation, the only mention of the first lady in the article was, “The legislation is a top priority of the first lady, Michelle Obama, who has said public service will be a main focus of hers in the White House. She founded the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program, after leaving her law career” (Herszenhorn, 2009). The bill may have been a success for Michelle Obama as she had supported its approval, but the article itself did not adequately cover her actions as there was only a small paragraph about her out of the 613 total words, and was therefore not chosen to study in detail.

Each article’s word length and activity covered was noted and categorized. In categorizing the articles, it was noted which initiative or campaign was covered and what the actual activity was. An example is an article published on August 26, 1995 about Hillary Clinton titled “First Lady Will Attend Women’s Conference,” by R. W. Apple. The action covered was Hillary Clinton announcing that she was attending a UN conference in China, and the initiative it was supporting was international women’s rights (Apple, 1995).

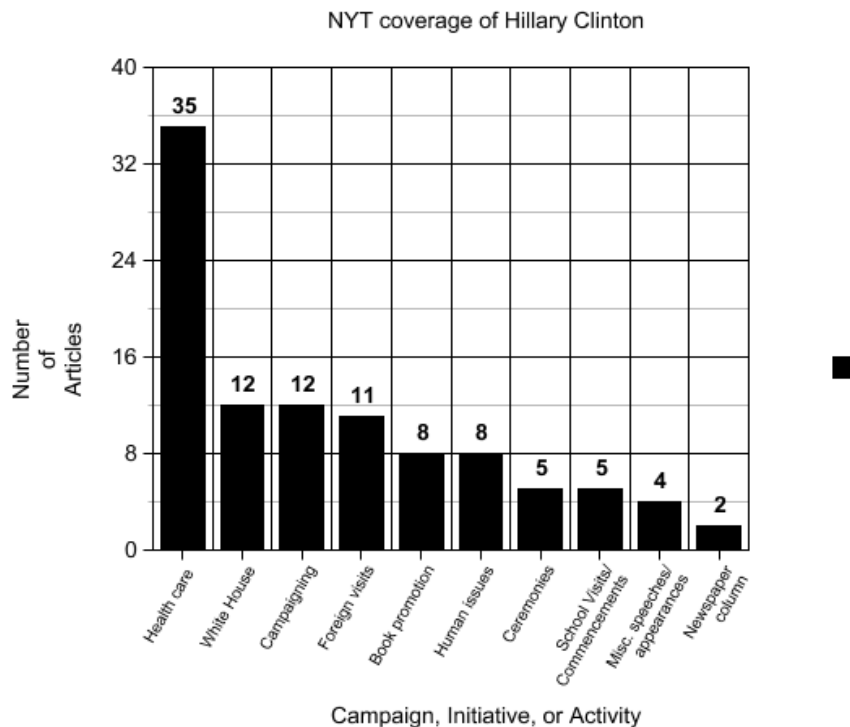
Each article chosen was then coded according to the negativity or positivity in its language on a five-point scale. The scale was Very Negative (1), Negative (2), Neutral (3), Positive (4), and (5) Very Positive. Generally when coding for such terms, Very Negative and Very Positive were used in commentary or columns that actively supported or opposed the action taken (Scharrer & Bissell, 2008). Negative and Positive were used in articles that merely reported the action, but might have used language or terms that leaned negatively or positively.

Neutral was used when language did not indicate either a negative or positive portrayal, or if it could not be determined.

### 3.3 Findings and Discussion

#### Hillary Clinton:

The search generated 1208 initial results, and of those, 102 relevant articles were read. Of the total articles chosen to read, articles about the health care reform campaign were featured the most (34.3%); followed by White House activities such as awarding medals, giving tours, presenting renovations, and others (11.7%); campaigning for Bill Clinton as well as other Democrats (11.7%); foreign visits/trips (10.8%); promotion for her book written during the term (7.8%); promoting “human” issues such as women and children’s rights (7.8%); ceremonies such as opening a statue, the Gridiron dinner, ceremonial first pitches, and others (4.9%); visiting schools and making Commencement speeches (4.9%); miscellaneous speeches/appearances (3.9%); and promoting her newspaper column (2.0%).



On September 26, 1994, Senate Leader George Mitchell announced that healthcare reform legislation was dead for that session of Congress (Bok, 1998). This signaled the end of Hillary Clinton's main campaign that she had focused most of her efforts on, as from January 20, 1993 to December 1994 a majority (68%) of coverage was focused on this topic. After her main campaign of health care reform failed in late 1994, Todd Purdum (1995a) wrote Hillary Clinton chose to focus on what she called "human" issues, specifically "issues affecting women and children at home and abroad" (Purdum, 1995a). Her foreign visits were focused on women's health, children's health, education, poverty, and medical access to all (Burros, 1995). She even wrote and promoted a book "about the need for better quality of family and community life in contemporary American society" (Tabor, 1995). Hillary Clinton was not silent on the reasons behind this shift. In "Hillary Clinton asks help in finding a softer image," by Marian Burros (1995), it was noted that Clinton was worried she had portrayed the wrong image of herself during the first two years of her husband's presidency when her focus was health care reform.

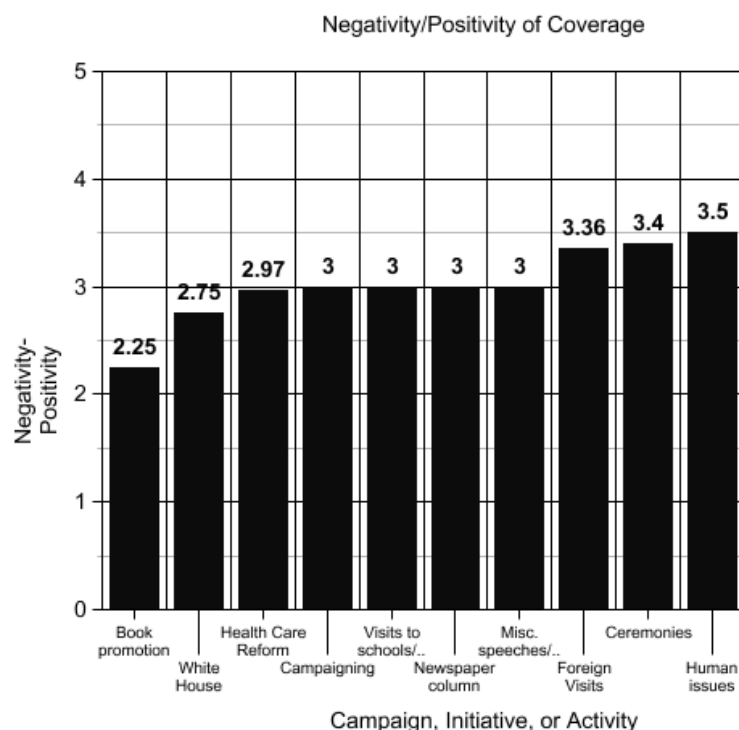
She explained that the media had framed her in a negative way because of her focus on policy, so she changed her focus to “human” issues (Burros, 1995). However, she did note that she had been interested in those issues for years before, but was trying to show the public a side of her that was lost during the Whitewater scandal and health care failure. This was also noticeable from looking at the activities covered chronologically, as well as the focus of the articles. The first 45 articles coded were generally focused on health care reform, until that initiative was deemed a failure in September 1994. The focus after was on other activities and initiatives she supported, such as promoting her book or campaigning. Creating a timeline of coverage reveals what Hillary Clinton spent most of her time doing during the first term of Bill Clinton’s presidency, or what the media focused on reporting. The specific breakdown of coverage is displayed in the graph above.

When coding the negative/positive language of Hillary Clinton’s coverage, the average of the entire sample of 102 articles is 2.97, on a five-point scale of (1) Very Negative, (2) Negative, (3) Neutral, (4) Positive, and (5) Very Positive. The overall average is close to a neutral score of 3, but does indicate that coverage leaned slightly negative. The categories of activities from most negative to most positive, and the averages they received, are:

1. Hillary Clinton’s book promotion and book tour, 2.25
2. White House activities, 2.75
3. Health care reform coverage, 2.97
4. Campaigning, 3.0
5. Visits to schools/Commencement addresses, 3.0
6. Newspaper column coverage, 3.0
7. Miscellaneous speeches/appearances, 3.0



8. Foreign visits, 3.36
9. Ceremonies, 3.4
10. Coverage on the “human” issues campaign, 3.5



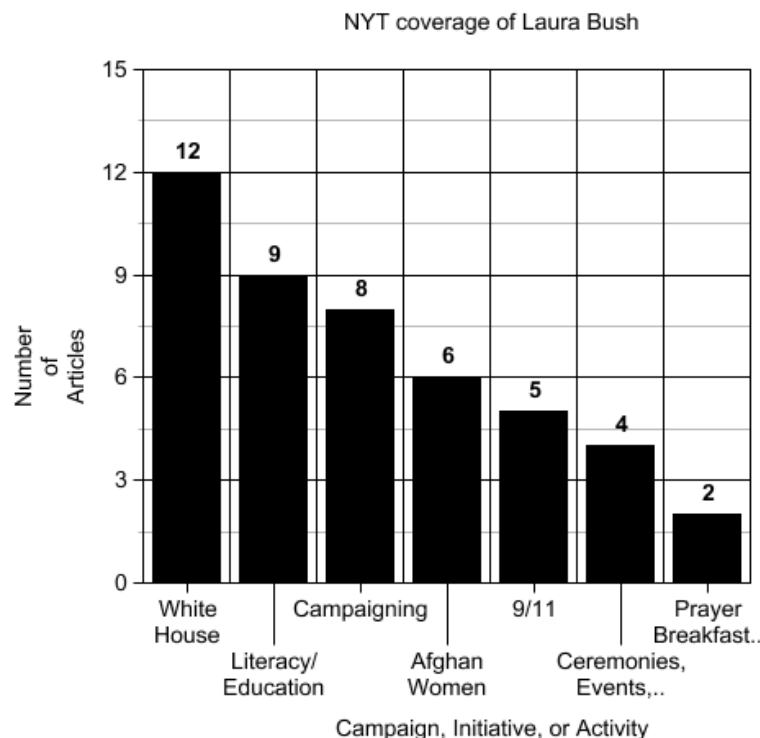
The results indicate that the most negative coverage was centered on Hillary Clinton’s book promotion. When looking deeper into the language, some of the titles of the articles indicate that the subsequent story may be negative: “Issue-Oriented First Lady is the Issue” (Mitchell, 1996), “On Book Tour, Mrs. Clinton defends herself” (Carvajal, 1996a), and “When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough go Touring” (Carvajal, 1996b). However, while the articles do cover her book promotion and tour, they also allude heavily to her health care reform failures. Journalist Alison Mitchell writes in “Issue-Oriented First Lady is the Issue” that Hillary Clinton “alienated potential allies and interest groups with the secrecy of her task force . . . produced a proposal that in retrospect was stillborn” and “put a cloud over Mr. Clinton’s presidency”

(Mitchell, 1996). This can be another possible explanation as to why Hillary Clinton's book received the most negative coverage.

In general, some coverage coded as positive (4) read, "spirited," "political savvy and breadth of knowledge," "hard-traveling champion," "best public advocate," "telegenic first week of campaigning," "high moral purpose," "stood out for authenticity," "stole the show," and "cement her role as champion of children" (Crossette 1995, Dowd 1993, Clymer 1994, Wines 1994, Purdum 1995b, Purdum 1995c, Tabor 1995). Some coverage coded as negative (2) read, "heavily scripted," "sounding for all the world like a housewife," "trolling for votes," "shown an angrier and less compromising side, making scathing attacks on groups," "health care only a tattered memory," and "underscoring the event's partisan overtones" (Ifill 1993, Henneberger 1995, Clymer 1993a, Clymer 1993b, Burros 1994, Fisher 1995).

#### Laura Bush:

The search generated 583 initial results and, of those, 46 articles were read. Of this total, articles about White House activities such as hosting state dinners, holiday parties, landscaping, and the inauguration were featured the most (26.1%); followed by articles about Laura Bush's literacy/education campaign (19.6%); campaigning (17.4%); initiative on Afghan women (13.0%); actions following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (10.9%); partaking in ceremonies and making appearances at events (8.7%); and remarks made at the Prayer Breakfast charity (4.3%).



Following Hillary Clinton's controversial policy-based campaign, Laura Bush stated that she would not be focusing on policy or political issues (Burros, 2001a). Instead, she wanted to focus on her chosen campaign of literacy and general White House activities, as one journalist wrote, "[Laura Bush] spoke briefly today about her education initiatives but declared policy questions off limits, conducted a short tour of the private quarters and discussed decorating changes" (Burros, 2001a). There were few articles (5) about Laura Bush's activities written from January 20-September 2001. However, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and the subsequent invasion and war, Laura Bush focused her efforts on victims and related issues. She was often called the country's comforter-in-chief because of her soft-spoken nature and the televised appearances she made, and was called "a grief counselor for the nation" (Bumiller, 2001a). An article titled "Laura Bush's View of Life After 9-11" by Elisabeth Bumiller stated that it was "a departure for a first lady who until Sept. 11 had sought a more traditional role" (Bumiller, 2001a), and another article titled "Giving Thanks, at the President's Table," by

Marian Burros, also stated that “when Mrs. Bush became first lady she expected to follow a more traditional role than her predecessor, speaking out on safe subjects, like education. The events two months ago thrust her front and center” (Burros, 2001b).

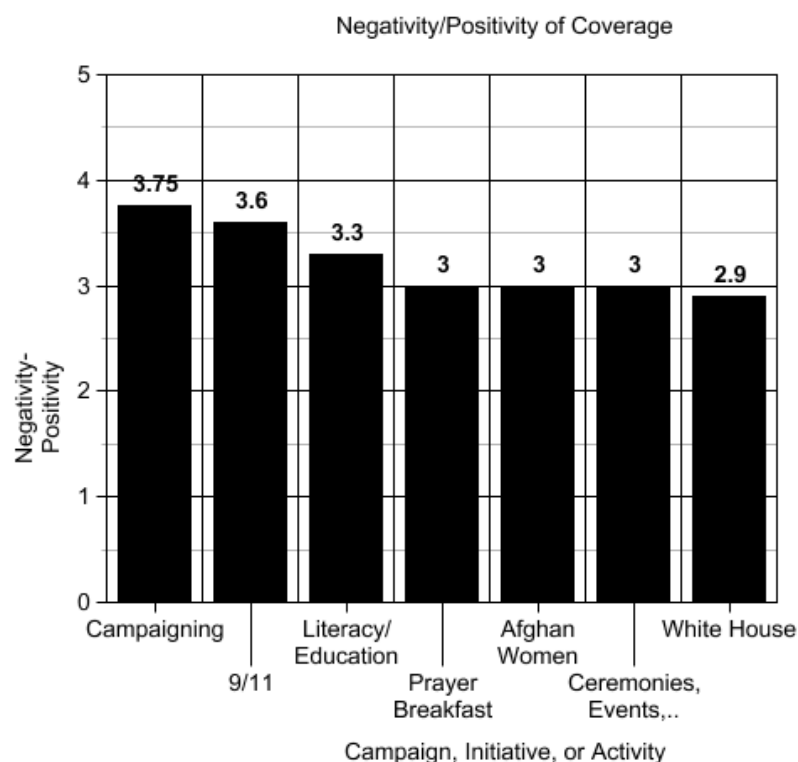
White House activities had the most coverage; probably because the category encompasses traditional events like the state of the union, state dinners, holiday season, and inauguration activities. Literacy and education was the next biggest category, although it was hypothesized that it would have more coverage than other categories. A possible explanation for this is something Laura Bush admitted herself, saying she wished her events “had a bigger audience” but they were “held on a day when news of Afghanistan or Iraq overshadowed it” (Bumiller, 2002). The entire sample is notably smaller than those for Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama, and there were fewer initial results, as well. This does support the hypothesis that Hillary Clinton would have the most coverage, though a possible explanation for Laura Bush’s smaller sample may be the terrorist attacks and subsequent War on Terror that was the most immediate and important issue featured in the news during this time.

When coding the negative/positive language of Laura Bush’s coverage, the average of the entire sample of 46 articles is 3.2, close to a neutral score of 3, but it does indicate that coverage leaned slightly positive. The categories of activities from most negative average to most positive average are:

1. Laura Bush’s White House activities, 2.9
2. Afghan women campaign, 3.0
3. Ceremonies, events and appearances, 3.0
4. Prayer Breakfast charity, 3.0
5. Literacy/education, 3.3

6. 9/11, 3.6

7. Campaigning, 3.75



The most negative articles were written about Laura Bush's general White House activities. It should be noted that this category also had the greatest number of articles. Negative language in this category included coverage focused on the "elitism" of the White House holiday season, and portrayed Laura Bush as "choreographed" (Slackman, 2004). However, the majority of other coverage was neutral or leaned positive. This was true especially in coverage after 9/11, when "the need for a national hand-holder made itself evident, Mrs. Bush's role as a kind of Florence Nightingale at least comes as a natural one" (Kuczynski, 2001) and when Laura Bush adopted the "public role as a grief counselor for the nation" (Bumiller, 2001b). This external event beyond the control of the presidency may have shifted Laura Bush's first lady goals and

brought her into the public eye more but judging by the positive score this coverage received, it was generally well received among the press.

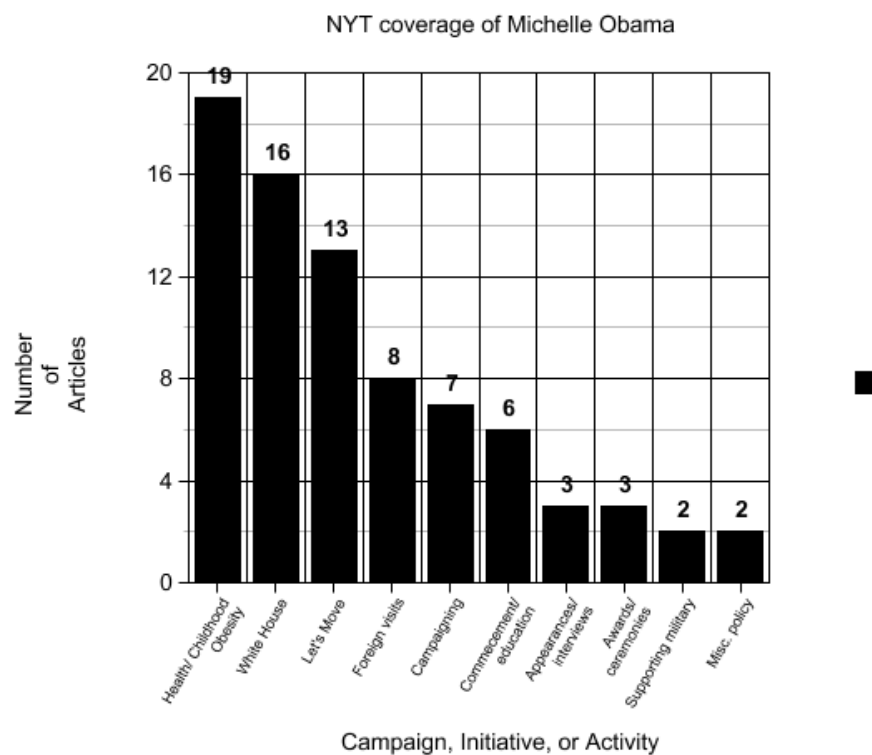
As the term went on, Laura Bush advocated heavily for the plight of Afghan women, and made history by being the first person other than the president to solely address the nation in the President's radio address (Bumiller, 2001c). This was a political first for Laura Bush and first ladies in general, as she was "the first first lady to use a president's radio address to deliver a central message of an administration" (Bumiller, 2001c). Yet, coverage on the matter received neutral scores, which may indicate that more political acts do not necessarily always have the most negative coverage, and because the president usually solely executes the radio address, this is considered a political action. In fact, Laura Bush was covered positively when it came to her campaigning actions, and campaigning is also considered a political action. These results do not support the hypothesis that the most political acts would be covered the most negatively.

Some coverage coded as positive (4) include: "popular first lady who creates almost no controversy" (Bumiller, 2004), "an increasingly visible and effective part of White House strategy," "formidable," "skillfull" (Kennedy, 2004), "heartfelt and articulate," "far more popular with voters across the country than the president is" (Purdum, 2004), and "warm, down-to-earth," "model wife and traditional first lady," "unflappable Mrs. Bush never seems to get into trouble," "Mrs. Bush has a dignity and discipline in public life that few first ladies have managed," "forceful" (Stanley, 2004).

### Michelle Obama

The search generated 670 initial results and, of those, 79 articles were read. Of the total number of articles chosen to read, articles about Michelle Obama's overall health and childhood obesity

campaign were featured the most (24.0%); followed by articles about White House activities such as inauguration events, hosting parties and events (20.3%); the “Let’s Move” campaign (16.5%); foreign visits (10.1%); campaigning (8.9%); speeches at Commencements or other educational activities (7.6%); appearances and interviews (3.8%); awards/ceremonies (3.8%); supporting the military (2.5%); and finally, activities supporting policy or government (2.5%).



The *New York Times* covered Michelle Obama’s health and childhood obesity campaign more than her other projects and activities. It should be noted that, for the purposes of this study, a distinction was drawn between Michelle Obama’s overall health and childhood obesity campaign and the “Let’s Move” campaign, as “Let’s Move” was announced in February 2010. Before this, Michelle Obama still conducted other activities supporting health and childhood obesity awareness in general, so the two campaigns were treated as two separate categories. Combining the number of articles about health and childhood obesity awareness with the number of articles about “Let’s Move” would account for about 40.5% of all coverage.

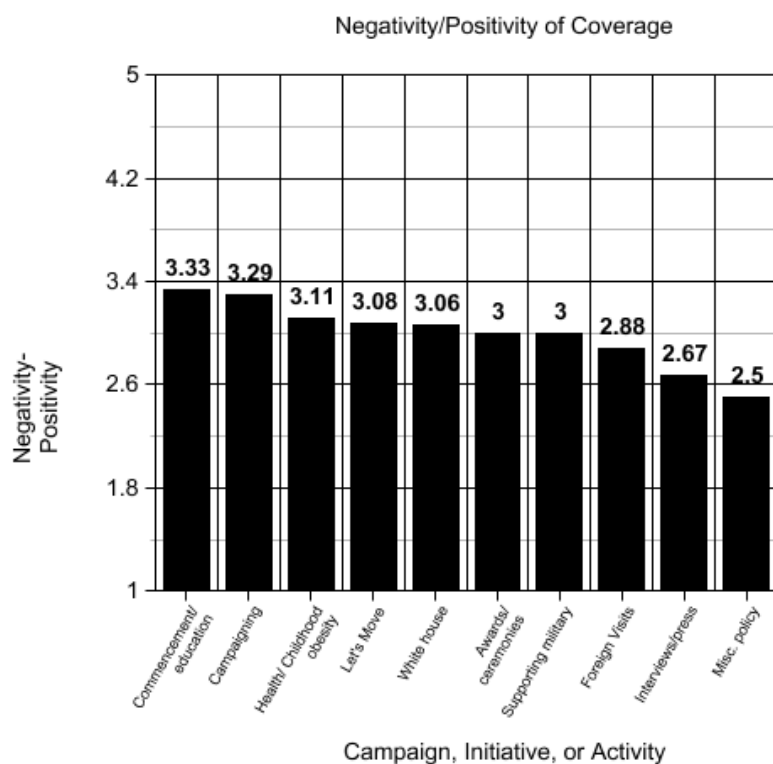
Closely following childhood obesity and health coverage was any general White House related coverage, including official dinners and parties. Many of these articles were about how Michelle Obama chose a menu for a dinner, how she hosted parties and other events and functions, and her press tours of remodeled or redecorated rooms in the White House. Foreign visits to Moscow, Haiti, Mexico, South Africa and Spain were the next highest covered activity, followed by campaigning. The majority of campaign coverage was about Michelle Obama campaigning for Barack Obama, and only 2 articles were about campaigning for other Democrats. Commencement speeches and speeches at high schools were the next highest covered activity, followed by general appearances/interviews, then awards/ceremonies such as a ceremonial first pitch and delivering an art award, and activities supporting the military and veterans. This does support the hypothesis that the first lady's main campaign will have the most coverage. In this case, articles covering Michelle Obama's support of health and childhood obesity awareness were covered the most.

When coding the negative/positive language of Michelle Obama's coverage, the average of all 79 articles is 3.06, close to a neutral score of 3, but it does indicate that coverage leaned on the positive side. The categories of activities from most negative averages to most positive averages are:

1. Supporting policy or government, 2.5
2. General appearances/interviews, 2.67
3. Foreign visits, 2.88
4. Supporting the military and veterans, 3.0
5. Awards/ceremonies, 3.0
6. White House activities, 3.06



7. “Let’s Move” campaign, 3.08
8. Health and childhood obesity campaign, 3.11
9. Campaigning, 3.29
10. Commencement speeches and speeches at high schools, 3.33



The most negative articles covered actions Michelle Obama took to support some policy, with an average of 2.5. Among the first ladies studied, only Michelle Obama’s coverage supported the hypothesis that more political actions would be covered the most negatively, although campaigning—considered a political action—did receive a slightly positive average. Both articles by Rachel Swarns, “First Lady Steps into Policy Spotlight in Debate on Health Care” (2009c), and “‘Mom in Chief’ Touches on Policy, Tongues Wag” (2009a), covered Michelle Obama speaking to members of Congress about policy, and she was covered as “stepping into more wonkish terrain,” while also attempting to remain a traditional first lady as

she had “chosen instead to deliver her recent remarks in more traditional settings for a first lady - at a clinic, a playground and in the White House garden” (Swarns, 2009c). Coverage of general appearances/interviews in the press was also a negatively leaning category, with an average of 2.67. These articles discussed Michelle Obama’s public image and persona, as one article reads, “the new first lady is methodically shaping her public image. . . . She has given coveted interviews primarily to women's magazines and news outlets that have allowed her to highlight her domestic side. . . . Ticks closely to her script, delivering lively, brief speeches that rarely stray from her prepared remarks and steer clear of controversy. . . . Fails to fully reflect the multifaceted first lady” (Swarns, 2009d). This coverage seemed to imply that there was something lacking in Michelle Obama’s public persona and how she portrayed herself to the press and public. Michelle Obama’s foreign visits also had a negative-leaning average of 2.88, with some articles focusing on “the choreography of her appearances” (Dugger, 2011).

Overall, however, the coverage was neutral to slightly positive. Michelle Obama’s health and childhood obesity awareness campaign had the most coverage, and those articles had a neutral, slightly positive leaning average of 3.11. The “Let’s Move” campaign also had a neutral, slightly positive leaning average of 3.08. Some of the coverage coded positive (4) or neutral (3) read, “[Michelle Obama] managed to make her ‘eat your peas’ message painless and even occasionally joyful, hamming it up through a three-day, four-state tour," "message has resonated," “inspiring,” “willingness to get her message across to the public in ways few of her predecessors would have considered,” and, “Mrs. Obama has been making her point” (Lander 2012, Swarns 2009d, Burros 2009). The articles were generally very neutral, with a few indicating approval or support of Michelle Obama, and this is reflected in the averages the two categories had.

Michelle Obama's campaigning coverage also had a neutral to slightly positive average of 3.29. Some coverage coded positive read, "rousing speech," "impassioned delivery drawing the crowd to its feet," "an upbeat ambassador for a struggling administration," "has become a dependable source of good news," and "most popular member of her husband's administration" (Rutenberg 2012, Kantor 2011, Stolberg 2010). This coverage reads from neutral to positive, using words like "striking" and "impassioned" that may indicate support.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

There were four main hypotheses tested while analyzing tone of coverage of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama's official activities in the *New York Times*. They are: The first ladies' main projects would have more coverage than other activities; Hillary Clinton would more coverage than Laura Bush or Michelle Obama; political actions would be covered the most negatively; and Hillary Clinton would have the most negative coverage because her main project was policy-based. The results were different for each first lady studied.

The results supported the hypothesis that actions concerning the first ladies' main projects would have more coverage than other initiatives for only two first ladies studied. Hillary Clinton did have more coverage on health care reform than any other initiative (34.3%), and Michelle Obama did have more coverage on her health and childhood obesity campaign (24.0%). But Laura Bush had the most coverage on her actions supporting the White House (26.1%), although her literacy and education campaign came in second (19.6%). This is significant because it indicates that, for at least two first ladies studied, coverage of main projects comprise a majority of coverage of official activities. Because press coverage "tends to reinforce and therefore magnify any phenomenon it observes," this focus on main projects might speak to expectations of first ladies in general (Pew Research Center, 2007). These main projects and causes may be covered more than other official activities because they could be considered more newsworthy or important than other official activities the first lady conducts, or because the public and press now *expect* first ladies to follow the pattern of adopting a main project or cause so they are reported more often. Limitations of this research would make answering that question

difficult, especially because articles about official activities only constituted a percentage of articles in general, but it is something to consider.

The results also supported the hypothesis that Hillary Clinton would have the most coverage in general, as initial search results for Hillary Clinton were twice as high as for Laura Bush and Michelle Obama (1208, 583, 670 results, respectively), as were the number of coded articles about official activities (102, 46, and 79 articles, respectively). But why did Hillary Clinton receive the most coverage? One possible explanation is how untraditional, and even divisive, she was as first lady, which may have made her more newsworthy or interesting to the public. Her policy-based campaign of health care reform attracted media attention, lawsuits, and both criticism and support, and other scandals like the Whitewater investigation only increased the media attention surrounding her. Laura Bush, on the other hand, was less conflict-ridden and received the least amount of coverage of the first ladies studied, which may imply some correlation between controversy and amount of coverage. However, Laura Bush also had to deal with 9/11 and the War on Terror during the years studied, which may have put her campaign on hold and resulted in less media coverage. Coverage of Michelle Obama fell somewhere in the middle, but she was also not as controversial as Hillary Clinton, as there were less scandals associated with her first term. There are many factors to consider when speculating why Hillary Clinton received the most coverage, especially since this study analyzed only a segment of overall *New York Times* first lady coverage, but it is probable that her controversial image was one reason.

The findings did not support the hypothesis that coverage of political activities would have the most negative tone for Hillary Clinton or Laura Bush. The most negative coverage of Hillary Clinton was that of her book promotion and tour (2.25), and the most negative coverage

of Laura Bush was that of general White House activities (2.75). Michelle Obama's coverage did support the hypothesis, as her most negative coverage was supporting policy and government (2.5). It was expected that political actions would be covered negatively because of previous literature that found such results (Scharrer & Bissell 2008). The findings in this study may be different because a specific segment of articles only about official activities were read which differs from how the other studies were conducted, or because the *New York Times* is generally an objective news source as opposed to others studied. This may even be a sign of changing times; perhaps recent first ladies are no longer "punished" by the media when acting more political. Hillary Clinton may have been criticized heavily for doing so, but it could be possible that attitudes have changed since the 1990's. In fact, many journalists and commentators have recently expressed their wishes for such a first lady. Consider the *Politico* article, "Leaning Out: How Michelle Obama Became a Feminist Nightmare," by Michelle Cottle published on November 21, 2013 that reads:

When Michelle Obama . . . [addressed] the nation's higher-ed gap, the move was greeted by some feminists with a relieved, "It's about damn time!" Here, finally, was an issue worthy of the Ivy-educated, blue-chip law firm-trained first lady, a departure from the safely, soothingly domestic causes she had previously embraced. Gardening? Tending wounded soldiers? Reading to children? "She essentially became the English lady of the manor, Tory Party, circa 1830s," feminist Linda Hirshman says. . . . Coverage of the new program stressed that it marks a rare foray into policy by FLOTUS. The *New York Times* observed that many of Michelle Obama's supporters have been itching for her to move beyond "evangelizing exercise and good eating habits," noting that, despite her widespread popularity, the first lady has long "been derided by critics who hoped she would use her historic position to move more deeply into policy." Don't count on it. . . . From Michelle Obama's past work we know that she cares about more than gardening and clean drinking water, Goff tells me. "She is one of the most influential black women on the planet, and I consider it a national shame that she's not putting the weight of her office behind some of these issues." (Cottle, 2013).

Cottle brings up a point both contested and supported by many; Michelle Obama should have adopted a less "domestic" and more politically "tough" issue-based campaign (Cottle, 2013).

Emily Bazelon (2012) also writes, “But why does mom-in-chief have to be the most important thing this strong, vibrant woman tells us about herself as she flexes the strange but considerable power of the office of first lady?” (Bazelon, 2012). Michelle Obama’s childhood obesity campaign was still an important one, but the findings of this study may possibly signal that the public is ready for a hard-hitting first lady. Will future first ladies who raise awareness of more controversial or political issues fare well in press or media coverage? While only time can provide the answer to that question, it seems as though they will.

Yet, how could the results suggest that political first ladies are more accepted in recent times if Michelle Obama’s coverage implied the opposite? One explanation is that the most negatively covered activities also had less coverage in general. Hillary Clinton’s book promotion and tour was only 7.8% of overall coverage, and coverage of Michelle Obama supporting policy or government was only 2.5% of overall coverage. In fact, in analyzing coverage of Michelle Obama, the only three activities that had averages below 3.0 were also among the least covered activities: coverage of activities supporting policy had an average of 2.5 and only made up 2.5% of coverage, coverage of general media appearances and interviews had an average of 2.67 and only made up 3.8% of coverage, and coverage of foreign visits had an average of 2.88 and only made up 10.1% of coverage. Coverage of Hillary Clinton also had three categories averaged below 3.0, and only health care reform coverage was a significant 26.1% of overall coverage. While coverage of Michelle Obama’s political activities did have the most negative tone as hypothesized, the results do indicate that these activities were also covered the least. The relationship between negativity and amount of coverage may be slight, but may also reinforce the overall neutrality of the results, as activities that were covered the most often had neutral averages.

The hypothesis that Hillary Clinton would have the most negative coverage in general was supported by the results. Her average score was a 2.97, while Laura Bush's was a 3.2 and Michelle Obama's was a 3.06. One reason behind Hillary Clinton's negative average may also be her controversial image and the fact that she had double the number of articles written about her than the other two first ladies. Articles written about controversial figures are likely to have at least some negative language, so if the overall number of articles increases then so will the amount of negative language.

Analyzing coverage of first ladies' activities reveals that first ladies perform an impressive balancing act. They are mothers raising children, wives in relationships, and women with private interests and pursuits. They lead White House social ceremonies by hosting huge functions, presenting White House awards, and planning renovations, dinner menus, and staff selection. They use the White House and first lady platform to advance important causes they care about, whether they are policy or health-based campaigns, or if they are campaigning for their husbands or other favored political candidates, or addressing students, community members, or congressional representatives. All the while, they remain role models to American women and even the international community, thus it is understandable that they are media magnets and covered for all their diverse actions and interests. While first ladies generally enjoy higher public approval ratings than their husbands, they are not safe from the prying eyes of the press and journalists who report on everything from hair length and to policy opinions. The same issue of the *New York Times* could contain a step-by-step guide on how to obtain Michelle Obama's muscular biceps as well as an in-depth analysis on her stance on the economic stimulus bill. The fact that the first lady position is inherently a gendered role further complicates coverage, as Cottle (2013) writes, "The post of first lady is never easy, **bringing with it all of**



**the scrutiny but none of the power of the presidency.** Trickier still, first ladies tend, to varying degrees, to get swept up in the debate du jour over how much progress women are (or are not) making in our society” (Cottle, 2013). Understanding press practices when journalists cover the first lady is, therefore, an important way to understand more about her actions and media presence, as well as the press’ and public’s reactions to her actions and what this means for women in general. As the position of first lady continues to evolve and the role of American women advances, studying media practices and uncovering underlying biases is vital in promoting an equal society.

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## **Appendix**

(Statutory/ Case Law)

Postal Revenue and Federal Salary Act 1967:

Section 221: A public official may not appoint, employ, advance, or advocate for appointment, employment, promotion, or advancement, in or to a civilian position in the agency in which he is serving or over which he exercises jurisdiction or control any individual who is a relative of the public official (Borelli, 2002, 45).

White House Personnel Authorization Act 1978:

Section 103(e): Authorizes appointment of staff to first lady in providing support to the president (Borelli, 2002).